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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to assess the utility of a conceptual model of factors involved in early childhood policy development. The assessed model provides a framework which focuses on the interactive nature of decision-making. Basic parameters are identified and applied to an instance of successful participation in the development of policies for day care support by a private, not-for-profit agency. Analysis focuses on characteristics of the interaction setting, roles of participants in the policy-making process, individual personality variables, the nature of the issue under consideration, the influence of organizational parameters, and societal values. Implications for theory construction, research, and for specialists in early childhood are discussed. (Author/RH)

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ANALYSIS OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALISTS IN POLICY-MAKING

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ANALYSIS OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALISTS IN POLICY-MAKING

Abstract

This paper examines the usefulness of a conceptual framework focusing on the interactive nature of decision-making for identifying factors involved in early childhood policy development. Basic parameters are identified and applied post hoc to an instance of successful participation in the development of policies for day care support by a private not-for-profit agency. Analysis focuses on characteristics of the interaction setting, roles of participants in the policy-making process, individual personality variables, the nature of the issue under consideration, the influence of organizational parameters, and societal values. Implications for theory construction, research, and for specialists in early childhood are discussed.

Early childhood specialists, like all citizens, have a number of options for influencing policy decisions regarding young children and their families. The techniques range from those requiring direct personal action, such as letters, phone calls, demonstrations, or expert testimony, to the delegation of responsibility to a lobbyist or other spokesperson. While these methods can be effective in some instances, they are applied from outside the policy-making structure, after the alternatives have been identified, and often after decisions have been made and publicly announced. The knowledge and experience of child development and other early childhood specialists is needed much earlier in the process in order to insure the consideration of alternatives based on sound information about children and families.

The most direct means for influencing policy, of course, is to hold a decision-making position, either elected or appointed. However, holding office requires a major commitment with sometimes only a small portion of that activity related to young children and their families. There is, therefore, a need for an alternative for early childhood specialists to become effectively involved in policy-making at the time when their knowledge and experience may be the most useful, when alternatives are being formulated, and when decisions are being made. Just such a technique was identified by Lerner (1976) in his discussion of the expert as a participant in the policy-making process.

The remainder of this paper examines the framework articulated by Lerner and its relevance for early childhood policy-making. The critical elements are identified and then illustrated with data from a case study of participation in the decision-making of a local non-profit agency regarding day care support. The appropriateness of the Lerner's model is evaluated, and both implications for professionals and recommendations for further research are discussed.

The Politics of Decision-Making

Decision-making is the process of choosing among competing alternatives for the distribution of some limited resource(s) according to a criterion adopted by the decision-maker. Decisions may be made by an individual or a group. Lerner, however, focuses on the decision-making as at least a two-person political process. In this model some degree of consensus on an option is required before it can become the final decision. His assumption is that regardless of the structure, problem-solving is conducted largely within an interpersonal context. A good relationship is defined by the degree to which a group works at its maximum on the problem-solving task. The climate of the process must be one of mutual respect, allowing every point of view within the group to be presented at least once. In order for problem-solving to be successful, it requires a collegial attitude which enables group members with diverse roles and interests to come together in deliberative, persuasive, cooperative, and sometimes competing interactions. And it is this negotiating relationship among group members that is the

essence of the political nature of decision-making. Options have to be fairly open and the give-and-take process among participants is essential.

Two types of participants, the expert and the politico, are involved. The expert is the person in that particular situation who possesses superior skill, information, or experience on the substantive issue that is of concern, and who can most nearly have the final word on the topic. The politico is "the person with an institutional position of authority in a system that leads him (sic) to consciously manipulate human relationships in order to achieve goals" (p. 20). It is essential for each type of participant to perceive himself/herself and the other(s) accurately in their respective roles.

Altogether Lerner lists nine essential characteristics of the interaction setting for a successful decision-making process:

- Problem amenable in principle to expertise
- Initial disagreement on best solutions
- Greatest rewards for individuals for group success
- A group decision rule approximating consensus
- Insufficient power of individuals to invoke their own preferred solution without group acquiesce
- Mutual role recognition
- Opportunity to communicate
- Encounters in a decision-making group
- Collegial setting

In addition to the characteristics of the settings, there are other influences on the outcomes. These are related to the respective roles, to individual personalities, to problem content, and to organizational and societal values which affect the behavior of participants and the decision-making process.

Looking first at role behavior, Lerner has found in a laboratory situation that persons designated as experts tended to act more assertively than they otherwise would and that, further, these "experts" generalized their role considerably beyond the substantive problem by assuming authoritative postures related to other aspects of the group process.

Although all experts (with the exception of the insecure whom Lerner dismisses as unable to survive in continuing expert-politico relationships) exhibited assertiveness, there were differences among them in the laboratory study based on selected individual personality characteristics. Variations were found in their needs for control of the group, affection or social interactions with personal warmth, and for inclusion in the group. Figure 1 shows the relations between the three basic patterns of expert behavior and the levels of individual needs on these characteristics. Briefly, experts in the leader category were individuals who needed to exert much control over the group but who had little need for either social interactions with personal warmth or for being an insider. Experts who behaved as brokers had high needs on all three dimensions. They needed to feel included in the group, to interact congenially, and also to

be involved in establishing and maintaining or changing authority relationships. The expert who behaved independently appeared to have comparatively little need for interaction. S/he was neutral with respect to control and needed little inclusion or affection.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

Although Lerner's framework does not at this time include similar descriptions of the characteristics of the politico, he does suggest that the interaction is influenced by the compatibility of the expert and the politico.

Task related factors affecting interaction have to do with the judgments of individuals in the group about the relative merits of alternative strategies. Such factors cover four parameters: initial evaluations made by individuals, the status of those individuals, the nature of the differences in the evaluations between the expert, politico, and other group members, and the technological complexity of the problem.

Lerner suggests that both individual and group judgments about alternatives involve two types of assessments. One is based on the values of the individual and relates to the desirability of the outcome. The other, the probability of a given strategy producing the particular outcome, is based more on fact. Since there are presumably differences of opinion initially, the essence of the decision-making process is to persuade group members to change their

position(s) to reach a consensus. Experts are presumed to be more effective in changing opinions about empirical questions, those concerning the probability of given outcomes,than in altering values. Further, Lerner sees experts as more effective with moderately technical issues.

Organizational factors influence expert-politico interactions in the direction of the collegiality-differentiation, degree of decision-unit autonomy, and in the degree of departure from the unanimity rule in arriving at authoritative decisions. In these organization-related matters, the politico generally has the advantage, thus providing some balance to the expert's power in substantive issues. The politico is the link with the upper level(s) of the organization and as such provides critical information about the feasibility/value of given options. S/he also has the power to distribute patronage/rewards to individual participants. Patronage may be tangible, such as privileged treatment, or more nebulous, such as the sense of positive identification with organizational ideals. The patronage power of the politico is obviously greater when the sources of career and personal satisfaction of group members are closely linked to their organizational standing.

The final area effecting expert-politico decision-making considered by Lerner is that of broad social forces. These forces shape both the direction of institutional development and individual role socialization. According to Lerner, the trend towards a highly technological society with an emphasis on extreme division

of labor socializes individuals to gain personal satisfaction from indispensability, and that indispensability comes from being able to make a unique contribution. Thus it fosters experts and makes expert-politico interactions more and more a core component of sociopolitical activity in the system.

At the role level politicos and experts have different career histories which result in disparate attitudes toward matters defined in a political context. The politician is socialized to perform as deliberator of political issues associated with the conduct of a political organization. Successful politicians must be guided by pragmatic situational considerations. The expert, on the other hand, usually comes directly from academia with a predilection for the idealistic. This is reflected in expert behavior in two different ways. Some experts become preoccupied with the technology of their subject matter, apparently unaware of the value or implications of larger political issues related to their work. Others become zealots, perceiving enormous political and philosophical implications considerably beyond the issue under consideration.

In the next section, each of the factors just summarized--characteristics of the decision-making setting, role perceptions, individual personality traits, problem content, organizational and social influences--are considered in relation to a specific instance of early childhood policy-making.

Application to the Politics of Early Childhood Policy-Making

The particular early childhood policy-making process which will be used to illustrate Lerner's framework is one in which the author participated as the expert. Details of this activity have been discussed elsewhere (Note 1).

Briefly, I was asked to chair a short-term committee to make recommendations for the role of a county-wide not-for-profit agency in day care. The specific charge related to both funding and other ways in which the agency could assist day care centers. My participation was contingent upon my being able to apply some techniques I had been developing from previous experiences and observations of policy development at the state and Federal levels. This condition was discussed at length with the Executive Director of the agency, the politico, and with one other committee member who assisted in my selection and who worked very closely with me in all aspects of the committee activities. It was not discussed with other committee members. Since my primary interest, in addition to successful completion of the task, was heuristic, to identify and accurately describe the conditions present in a successful instance of effecting policy related to day care, it was essential that committee members function as naturally as possible.

The committee consisted of nine members representing the agency, business, labor, day care providers, parents, and professionals in social work and in the licensing of child care facilities, and two ex officio members, the Executive Director of the agency, and the

recorder. The committee met routinely for two hours one night every other week over a five-month period, and, with the exception of one parent, most members attended regularly. About half of the members participated actively in discussions. Between the full committee meetings, the social work member, recorder, and chairperson worked intensively as a team planning and preparing content for meetings and with university student volunteers in the collection and analyses of day care information.

The decision-making task of this committee seems to be a very appropriate instance of early childhood policy-making for analyses using Lerner's conceptual framework. Although it was not political in the sense of an elected official determining public policy, the decision did involve the allocation of scarce resources and individual participants clearly met the criteria for politico and expert. The Executive Director of the agency was the politico. The expert was identified previously as the author. There was mutual recognition of these roles by each other and by other group members. Questions regarding day care facts were addressed to the expert while agency related considerations were directed primarily to the Executive Director. (It should be noted that no formal measures of committee functioning nor members' perceptions of that process were taken. This analysis represents the author's impressions which have been checked with some group members but which were not assessed empirically. That is the next step in the process.)

The decision to be made by the group involved the role of the agency in day care. It was considered an important decision by both the agency and the day care community. The agency anticipated numerous requests for day care funding in the near future and was concerned about both the total amount of its resources which should be allocated for day care and the criteria for selecting specific programs to support. The problem was amenable in principle to expertise. There is a body of knowledge about the costs, demand, and effects of day care which could facilitate informed decision-making.

There was some initial disagreement on the best solution within both the agency board and the study committee, although the extent is not clear. Most members understood the need for day care. However, some viewed day care as primarily a governmental or parental responsibility, not that of a private agency. Related to this, some members also saw the demands increasing and the agency unable to cope with them. Others sympathized with the need for services for parents who must work outside the home and who needed reliable care at a reasonable cost. Still others, notably the expert, were interested in citizen education about day care and in the support of respected community groups for such services both in the direct funding and in future advocacy.

Through the appointment of a committee, the agency established the decision rules. A committee recommendation was requested, which

implied that the greatest reward for individuals would be determined by group success and that the decision rule would approximate group consensus. Also, by the establishment of the group, no individual possessed the power to invoke his/her own solutions without group acquiesce. Furthermore, the committee had a clear deadline, to submit its recommendations in time for use in the next agency funding period.

As was indicated earlier, there were frequent opportunities for group discussion and a collegial format was developed in several ways. First, in order to obtain common agreement about the purpose and expected outcomes, much of the first two meetings was spent in discussing and clarifying the charge. Each committee member was asked his/her perspective and the group consensus checked with the President of the Agency Board for accuracy. Then, with the guidance of the expert, the group generally identified the types of information necessary to reach a decision.

Secondly, each committee member was identified as bringing some critical information or perspective to the group and each was provided a specific time during the deliberations to present this content to the committee. Information about parents' needs and concerns for day care, for instance, included the personal perspectives and experiences of members who were parents of young children and users of day care. The discussion of licensing standards was led by the Licensing Supervisor member. The member representing the social work perspective assumed considerable

responsibility for the development of the interview instrument and analysis of the data, and the agency board representative, who was the director of marketing research for a large grocery chain, provided some technical assistance in the study design. The observations of individual members were usually supplemented by the expert with relevant data from state or national studies.

In addition, members who missed a meeting, who did not participate, or who gave either verbal or nonverbal indications of dissatisfaction were contacted individually immediately following the meeting, usually by the Executive Director, to discuss their reactions and concerns. Each meeting was also evaluated informally by the core working team of the expert, social worker, Executive Director, and recorder. Concerns were addressed immediately with follow-up, changes in format, agenda, or whatever was appropriate.

Each meeting was carefully planned with written agenda with responsibility for each item assigned. Since most committee members were relatively uninformed about day care, each meeting involved the presentation and discussion of some aspect of the service such as licensing standards and process, costs, effects on children, Federal and state policies, needs, or local resources.

To obtain current service information, the committee developed an interview survey of local not-for-profit day care center directors (Note 2). Most of the work for this study was done by the expert, social work member, and recorder with the assistance

of university student volunteers.[2] The committee primarily identified the content to be included. In addition to data collection, the study served a second critical function. It provided the opportunity for making individual concerns/assumptions more explicit, for gaining concensus about the content which would be considered in making the decision, and also served as a vehicle for educating committee members about day care.

The committee completed its work and submitted its recomendations to the agency board within the specified time frame. There was consensus among the members. The recommendations were accepted and the efforts were judged successful by the agency board, by the Executive Director, and by committee members.

Evaluation of Lerner's Framework

Lerner's framework was useful in the post hoc identification and description of important aspects of the decision-making process. Generally, all of the factors Lerner suggested were evident and seemed applicable to this instance of early childhood policy-making.

Considering first the decision-making setting, all nine characteristics were present. There were, however, two other factors which were also involved and which appeared to be equally important for the process. Not only did the politico and expert have mutual appreciation for each other's roles, but each was also very competent in his and her respective area. The politico was knowledgeable about his organization and was skillful in planning and managing it. The expert had been in the field of early childhood for

20 years and had been involved in several policy-making activities at the Federal, state, and local levels. Competence may be implied in the notion of roles and mutual recognition. However, it is possible to have the latter condition without the persons occupying the roles having the skills to successfully deal with the problem.

A related critical factor in this decision-making process was the availability of the time and competence to do an immense amount of preparation between committee meetings. This background work by the expert, an extremely dedicated committee member, and the recorder, allowed the process to move at a pace that kept most participants interested and involved and enabled the committee to function primarily as decision-makers.

The expert clearly assumed an assertive role in the group. Having also been selected chairperson reinforced both to the group and to the expert the leadership expectations. In terms of personal style, the expert would be categorized as a broker with high needs for control, personal warmth, and inclusion. These characteristics matched well those of the politico whose personal style was also high on needs for warmth and for inclusion in the group, but who deferred leadership related to content to the expert.

As would be expected when the major setting conditions were present and there was a compatibility between the expert and the politico, the group had basically a good relationship. Most of the group decision-making time was devoted to the problem at issue. As was indicated previously, however, some time was spent both during

and between meetings in establishing and maintaining rapport and involvement in the group.

In regard to task-related factors in the decision-making, the potential for disagreement over values assigned to alternative solutions was reduced considerably through the early presentation of the agency criteria for involvement with services, which was accompanied by a clear statement of agency unwillingness to negotiate. This quickly narrowed options. While not every participant agreed with the criteria and there were a few attempts to broaden the range of options, generally the agency parameters were accepted, and the expert and the group focused their efforts on the consideration of acceptable alternatives.

Most committee members recognized the need, but additional information beyond personal experiences with day care was necessary for decision-making and this was seen largely as the responisbility of the expert. While the expert provided some background through verbal presentations, content was also made known by other techniques, notably through building on and supplementing the experiences of members with relevant empirical data and through the development of the interview questionnaire. The level of technicality of the content was probably in the low range. There were terms, data, and processes which were unfamiliear to the group but which were readily understood once they were discussed.

Complementing the role of the expert in substance was the superior knowledge of the politico in organizational matters.

This was especially evident in providing the linkage with the agency's officers and board of directors. The Executive Director provided the information cited above about agency criteria and priorities and thus defined the feasibility (or value to the organization) of the options under consideration. The Executive Director also provided information about appropriate points for rechecking with the agency board and facilitated such checks by arranging opportunities and by briefing the expert in preparation for any communications with the officers or board.

The distribution of patronage by the politico was much less important than the linkage in this example, since none of the participants' careers were closely tied to the organization. Some identification with agency, in this instance recognition for committee participation, did seem to be important to most participants. In addition, at least one or two group members may have been interested in future roles in the organizational activities.

The influence of the technological trends in this instance was reflected in the solicitation and involvement of an expert in the decision process. Traditionally private charitable agencies such as this one have determined policy through internal lay member and/or staff recommendations, primarily on the basis of charity. However, with the increase in day care needs and services and with funding and regulation by various levels of government, the considerations and options have become more complex. And

correspondingly, more experts are emerging in the field. The technology, however, is not so complex that all policy-makers will consider expert counsel in day care decision essential.

The socialization of early childhood specialists seems to fit well the image Lerner suggests. As a profession, we are probably as enmeshed in the theoretical and the ideal as any other academics. In fact, Steiner (1976) in his analysis of child-family policy at the Federal level makes precisely this point, that some of the current fragmented situation is the consequence of the inexperience of early childhood specialists with the political process.

All in all, Lerner's framework provided a fairly adequate structure for the analysis of this particular instance of early childhood policy-making. Although it was developed for governmental decision-making involving career experts, it seems equally as appropriate for the private sector and shorter term commitments.

It is a process oriented framework. It is, however, primarily descriptive. While being able to identify certain features and knowing they are important components of successful decision-making is certainly helpful, much more is needed for a comprehensive theory. As Lerner has pointed out, there is no information about relations among the factors. Clarification of both the relative weights of the variables and interactions among them are essential. Some are undoubtedly more important than others and the presence or absence of various factors must have differential impacts on the

decision-making process. In order to do this, valid and reliable measures are needed for each of the variables.

The framework also does not take into consideration the developmental nature of the process. What changes occur in the process or in relations among variables over time?

One of the greatest disadvantages of the process, at least as it was implemented in this instance, is its costliness in terms of time and energy. Are there more efficient and/or effective ways to engage in the decision-making processes?

Despite these shortcomings, the framework seemed to be a good enough fit to this decision-making situation to provide some interaction hypothesis for further investigation. Verification is needed from other policy-making examples. Both documented case studies and experimental investigations are necessary to identify and examine the critical relations among factors. How are these influenced by the area or discipline of the policy being determined?

The framework needs to be examined in relation to alternative models. Are there differences in content, outcome, or implementation between policies arrived at through this group process oriented model and those determined by other means?

Future study of these and other theoretical issues would appear to be ideal for multidisciplinary inquiry, involving political scientists, social psychologists, and content related specialists.

In addition to the theoretical relevance, there are other implications for those interested in child and family policy.

This analysis provided clear indication that at least this instance of early childhood policy-making fits well a political decision-making model. The question is how characteristic of early childhood policy development was this situation. Based on my experience in a number of early childhood related policy activities, I believe many of these same factors are present in most such situations. While this may appear to be the ideal instance, it certainly was not perfect. There were problems with individual group members; establishing a professional working relationship with the Executive Director was very difficult, and attempts to have the agency use program quality as a critical factor for support failed. We did, however, accomplish what the agency had intended and we also made some incremental progress in educating some previously uninformed and potentially influential community members about day care issues.

What was unique about this instance was that the expert was informed and alert to the political aspects of the process and was able to contribute the effort required to use such knowledge to generate a relatively successful outcome. This could not, however, have been accomplished without the skill and support of the politico.

The implications of this approach are several. First, there is a viable mechanism for influencing early childhood policies. Lerner's framework provides a good beginning for conceptualizing

the process. Those wishing to influence early childhood policy decisions may be more effective if they are knowledgeable about the political process and are able to operate effectively within such a framework. I believe this is a learned skill and a most appropriate area for those early childhood specialists who are interested in policy development. As a profession, we have not been sensitized to the political process. However, we have a good foundation; we are basically a people-oriented profession with some knowledge of behavior and motivation. Rather than being disdainful about the decision-making process, we need to appreciate the skills of/and work in tandem with politicos to understand how to affect the system. We must be able to create and take advantage of opportunities for influencing policy. Early childhood specialists must view themselves as experts who are critical for appropriate policy development regarding young children and their families and must be seen as such by decision-makers. This means that preparation for early childhood specialization should include some training and experience in political decision-making.

A second implication is that such participation requires a tremendous investment of time and energy. It may, however, be more effective than other techniques. We, as experts, are distressed that policy-makers fail to follow our advice; yet, a part of the problem seems to be that we are unaware of the constraints on the policy-makers. Participation as partners in the process should increase the knowledge and skills of both experts and politicos and should result in more informed policy decisions related to children and families.

Reference Notes

1. Prior to the discovery of Lerner's framework, I had begun developing a conceptual structure encompassing some similar constructs as they applied to early childhood policy-making. (cf. Kilmer, S., Sattazahn, D., & Ciccone, J. A model for cooperative policy-making for local day care support. A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. New York, August 1979.)
2. Details of the study and process are available from the author.

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Footnotes

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[2]The author also thanks the students in Social Work 320 at the University of Illinois for their assistance in interviewing day care center directors and to students Becky Hurt, Susan Hill, and Betsy Bachhuber for their assistance in the development of the interview instrument and data analysis.

Figure 1
Relation Between Patterns of Expert Behavior
and Individual Interpersonal Needs

Patterns of Expert Behavior	Level of Individual Interpersonal Needs		
	Control	ffection	Inclusion
Leader	High	Low	Low
Broker	High	High	High
Independent	Neutral	Low	Low